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ABSTRACT

Over the years many different psychologists and psychoanalysts have found value in the concept of the self-narrative, or the "life story." Narrative thought demands an appreciation of the particulars of time and place and a focus on multidimensional understanding of events, people, emotion, and motivation. By using the life story or self-narrative, one can explore the past, examine its effect on the present, and determine how lessons learned can be related to planning for the future. Writing one's life story gives spaciotemporal structure to the separate events and expectations by sequencing and determining relevance. Individuals often identify a "life theme"--affective and motivational characteristics, values, beliefs, and interpretations of events that are repeatedly played out in the interactions in a person's life. As stories are retold (in psychotherapy sessions, for example), they undergo changes because people use earlier versions to review experiences and allow alterations in how they interpret events. By introducing these ideas to children as they learn about stories and storytelling, "re-visioning" experiences could deconstruct dysfunctional ideas before they become too ingrained in their behavioral road, making change of direction more difficult. Edutainment options from "Choose Your Own Adventure" books and video or computer games that drive home the consequences of decisions and give children opportunities to revise their story and improve their choices is one way to incorporate the art of story re-telling. (Contains 24 references.) (AEF/BEW)

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Story Re-Visions: Tales For The Future

by Jacqueline W. Gray

Abstract

Stories are habitations through which we live. The glasses through which we see and interpret the world are constructed through our life stories. The lenses are the prescription that focuses our individual experiences. When using an inaccurate lens, things look blurry, distorted and, many times, scary. The theory, construction and re-vision of life stories provide a basis for the interpretation of past events and future expectations. This paper looks at enrichment of our storied lives through color, spontaneity, diversity and creativity cause a new level of excitement. It explores how being unique can capture the greatest prize--the self.

Introduction

When dealing with people, Freud and others since, have noticed the human's inclination to describe themselves narratively as a means to know and identify themselves. Freud found the word *self* too nebulous and used instead the German word *seele*, this best translates into English as *soul*, but English translations of Freud's work used *mind* instead. Jung and Rogers moved modern psychology more toward the idea of *self* and the development of a single *selfhood* (Parry, and Doan, 1994).

The terms *cognitive* and *post-cognitive* have been used to distinguish between modernist and postmodernist, as well as *epistemological* and *ontological*, to construct the division between the two "eras" (McHale, 1992). McHale discusses poet, composer, performing artist Dick Higgin's concept of *cognitive* and *post-cognitive* with the following questions:

The cognitive questions:

"How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?"

(Asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, until around 1958.)

The post-cognitive questions:

"Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?"

(Asked by most artists since then; quoted in McHale, 1992, pp. 32-33.)

While artists began to look at the world in a new way, the therapeutic world continued with the dichotomy of cognition and emotion. As post-modernists begin looking at the many selves, they interweave those threads each self into the tapestry of emotion, cognition and other constructs that become the total "self."

Hermans' (1992) Valuation Theory describes the self as an organized process of valuation. He believed the individual's meanings of events are articulated in a self-narrative, or life story, that is organized and re-organized over time. Because there are emotional reasons an individual dwells on some part of their life story and neglects other parts, the person becomes a motivated storyteller.

Bruner (1986) described two modes of thought, propositional thought and narrative thought. Propositional thought consists of logical argumentation aimed at convincing one of some abstract, concept-independent truth; a logicoscientific and paradigmatic aim at theoretical, formal interpretation of a general abstract paradigm for gaining understanding. Narrative thought, conversely, presents concrete human and interpersonal situations to demonstrate their particular validity. The story mode requires imagination, an understanding of human intention, and an appreciation of the particulars of time and place. Narratives focus on people and on the cause of their

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actions: their intentions, goals, and subjective experience. Properties of character, setting and action are central to the narrative mode (Vitz, 1990).

Kelly (1955) contributed the prototypic model of psychotherapy with the use of narrative reconstruction in his work with the client's self-characterizations. Kelly's perspective has become integrated into postmodern approaches to psychology. Constructivist psychotherapy is described as a postmodern epistemology in which proactive, self-organizing features of human knowing is emphasized (Neimeyer, 1993). From this view one is an active participant in creating their understanding and view of the world.

Vitz (1990) supplied a psychological basis for the use of stories in teaching moral development. Language as used in teaching is usually in the written form of a text, without much emotion, limited in image value, and generally context-free, to express the universal truth of paradigmatic knowledge. When the propositional thought is introduced as fact there is little emotional involvement, and the left hemisphere of the brain primarily used. When telling or writing a story, language takes on a heavy emotional and imaginistic meaning, usually carried by the intonation and words with associated images. This adds depth and flesh (Cataldi, 1993) to the story by incorporating syncretic thought. Syncretic thought is associated with general emotional processing, recognition and affective language (Vitz, 1990). Syncretic thought utilizes analog cognition and knowledge by relating the affective with the cognitive. Vitz (1990) proposes a more complete and evolved learning experience created by using situational truth presented in a narrative format such as Aesop's Fables and current real moral dilemmas. Morality is grounded in personal emotional experience and understanding should be evident from personal virtues (MacIntyre, 1981).

According to Sarbin (1986) narrative is important in our lives because "...our plannings, our rememberings, even our loving and hating, are guided by narrative plots." He went on to explain that moral choice is particularly illuminated by understanding the relevance of a given moral issue to a person's understanding of their life as a story. The life story or self-narrative can either be a self-constructed story of one's life, often including bits and pieces of various other stories, or an almost literal acting out of life according to a narrative model.

Narrative provides a more complete and multidimensional understanding of events, emotions and an individual's life script than just relating the paradigmatic aspects of the situation. By using this narrative model one can explore the past, examine it's effect on the present and determine how all that has been learned can be related to planning for the future.

Life Stories

Howard (1991) described identity as a life story which individuals begin constructing, consciously or unconsciously, in late adolescence. Like stories, identities may assume a "good" form--a narrative coherence and consistency-- or they may be illformed. The life story model of identity suggests how anyone seeking to know the whole person may apprehend identity in narrative terms.

At an early age, children ask parents endless questions. The questions generally fit into the generic form: "How can I understand (make sense of) these puzzling aspects of my experience?" The repeated questions attempt to get a story that will give them a context and a culture in a form that makes the answer make sense (Howard, 1991). For example, the question, "Why do birds fly?" is an attempt to get a narrative (story) response that makes sense at the child's developmental level. To answer in short statements then provokes more questions until the need for narrative context is satisfied (McAdams, 1985). Mair (1988) described stories as habitations. These narrative responses are

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how children make sense of their lives and develop their view of the world. Along with those provided by parents, narratives come in the forms of cartoons to full length feature movies that portray conflicts of good and evil, issues of life and death, as well as the role of love and hate in human interactions (Bettelheim, 1976).

Writing one's life story gives spaciotemporal structure to the separate events and expectations by sequencing and determining relevance (Howard, Maerlender, Myers, and Curtin, 1992; Hermans, 1991). Perhaps the most important information people convey when they write their life history, or autobiography, is their life theme (Howard, et al., 1992). A life theme or script includes the plan, values, beliefs that are repeatedly played out in the interactions in a person's life (Berne, 1972). Life stories are tailored toward revealing an understanding of a construct that questionnaires, role playing, behavioral measures, projective measures, etcetera are hard pressed to accurately assess.

When asked to write their life story, the individual usually does not start with "I was born on September 2, 1951 to Harold and Peggy Westfahl." Individual's identify significant events or times of their life upon which to focus. The events they choose and how those events are interpreted reveal the individual's perspective of life, in general. Are they achievers who select stories of their successful events? Are they victims who always see someone else as responsible and taking advantage of them? Whatever events are chosen the color and dimension of the emotions and thoughts that make those events significant help the reader to know more about the individual than if they only stated the facts. Themes will emerge from the stories whether religious affiliations, racial or ethnic ties, gender orientation, professional identity, or family tradition and history (Parry and Doan, 1994). It may also reveal how an individual interacts with others, solves problems and overcomes obstacles.

Many times individuals expect their lives to be like a trip down a super highway--straight, smooth and fast. If the road is bumpy, we encounter potholes or detours, or if we take a side trip it is interpreted as failure. Years later, when re-membering past events, it is usually the eventful trips we are most likely to recall. These diversions add the color, depth and dimension to our experiences because we have revised the script turning it into an adventure. Whether those rough roads include obstacles of hardship and adversity through issues of race, class, gender, age or other aspect, they play a part in who the individual is, how they use the events and how they re-member the incident (Moffitt and Singer, 1994).

Story Re-Vision

Through the process of telling and retelling one's self-narrative or autobiography, the affective and motivational characteristics of the storyteller are revealed including their beliefs and values (Hermans, 1992). As the story is retold, it undergoes changes. The individual utilizes their values, beliefs, experiences and affect with respect to their personal development, life crisis, class, gender, and other bumps and barriers along the road to re-view the experience and allow changes to take place in how they interpret the event. As the previous interpretation is deconstructed, taken apart for examination, it allows a new interpretation to be constructed, rebuilt from new information and interpretation resulting in altered beliefs and affect (Hermans, 1992; Parry and Doan, 1994; White and Epston, 1990). By utilizing story re-vision an individual not only examines the past, but applies it to the present, and projects its impact upon the future (Hermans, 1992).

When my children were small they read books called "Choose Your Own Adventures". These books were read and re-read time and again because every few pages a choice needed to be made for the

character. Depending upon which choice they made the book directed them to turn to a specific page. Each time the book was read it became a different story because the decisions could be changed.

The original life story can be examined for constraining rules or restrictions that limit the individual's ability to explore their world. Biases and prejudices can be reexamined. A person's life theme will become more evident with the re-telling of the story since those aspects of events will be continued through the re-visions (Hermans, 1992). By reevaluating the events as they appear in the original story they may begin to see strengths and accomplishments that may not have developed without the challenges, adventures, obstacles, or difficulties that brought them from the past to the present. Hermans (1992) indicated that stories change over time with the re-telling and re-vision especially during times of disruption whether circumstantial or developmental.

An Illustration

In the story of "The Wizard of Oz" (Baum, 1956), all Dorothy, the Tin Woodsman, the Scarecrow and the Lion need to do was find the Wizard and their problems were solved. In Richard Gardner's (1980) story of "Dorothy and the Lizard of Oz" we find that the simple solutions to problems the Wizard provided did not really solve any of their problems. Dorothy returned to Kansas to find she still needed to deal with the sheriff about her dog, Toto. The Scarecrow had a diploma, but he returned to the farm where he'd worked to find another scarecrow doing his old job and no one willing to give him the chance to do a job that took a brain just because he had a diploma. The Tin Woodsman returned to his home to find that having something ticking on his chest did not make him feel any more loved. Just showing his "heart" to others did not make them love him more either. The Cowardly Lion proudly showed his medal for bravery and courage, but it did not take away the fear when he was confronted by dangerous situations. It took more than simple solutions for each of them to find the characteristics deep within themselves.

Similarly, when individuals' write their life stories, they may seek simple and magical solutions. Through the Re-Vision process they may see deep within themselves the very thing they thought they lacked.

This is a re-vision of a familiar story. Gardner identified the fallacies of the original story and provided a re-vision that retained the facts from the original story and constructed new interpretations within those parameters.

Therapeutic Implications

A rising form of intervention in psychotherapy is the life story, which is a condensed psychobiography that focuses on the role of the symptomatic complaint in the client's life-journey (Omer, 1993). It is not the life story that is so new as the use of story re-vision to reconstruct the life history and change the client's view, or interpretation, of the events (Parry and Doan, 1994). The next step involves the client projecting into the future to construct ways their new view of these past experiences can help the client reach their personal goals (Hermans, 1992).

The Preventionist Application

By implementing these ideas with children as they learn about stories and storytelling, re-visioning experiences could provide a means to deconstruct dysfunctional ideas before they become in deep ruts in their behavioral road making change of direction more difficult. This approach also allows for re-visiting these stories at a later date when the individual has more information and experience to further re-view and implement more re-vision for the future.

Conclusions

Through the story re-visions events that may have been viewed as problems, burdens, potholes, ruts, obstacles or difficulties over the course of time are re-

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constructed revealing the adventure, excitement, humor, color, and depth that can spur strength, growth and learning. These re-visions allow us to ponder the scenes from new directions and perspectives that provide insights that were not previously believed as possible. The possibilities story re-visions provide to not only psychotherapy, but also to education, literature, theater and video tape are endless. The development of virtual reality computer games that provide children with consequences of decisions and opportunities to revise their story and improve their choices is only one new aspect of an old educational tool.

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